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# "Doch Sehnend Stehst /Am Ufer Du" ("But Longing You Stand On The Shore"): Hölderlin, Philosophy, Subjectivity, And Finitude

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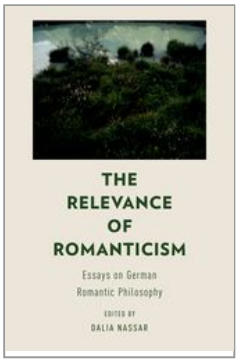


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# “Doch Sehnend Stehst/Am Ufer Du” (“But Longing You Stand on the Shore”)

Hölderlin, Philosophy, Subjectivity, and Finitude

Richard Eldridge

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## Abstract and Keywords

This essay first surveys Hölderlin’s mature philosophical sense of the human subject as caught ineluctably between abstract reflection and concrete receptivity, and it contrasts that sense briefly with the stances of Kant, Schiller, and Hegel. It then traces the consequences of this sense for Hölderlin’s poetology, and it concludes by showing how both this philosophical sense and this poetology are enacted in Hölderlin’s late, major fragment “Rousseau.”

*Keywords:* absolute, reflection, receptivity, drives, poetology, Rousseau

## 7.1.

As the name of the discipline implies, philosophy is centrally concerned not simply with knowledge alone, but with wisdom or with the problem of orientation or with the achievement of a life of felt and reasonable meaningfulness. In strongly traditional societies, this problem may not arise, or solutions to it may be held in place as what is simply to be done, without diverse paths or possibilities of reflection on them significantly presenting themselves. Within modern social economies, marked in contrast by technological development and strongly divided labor, things are much less settled, in ways that can provoke both anxiety and reflection. But how is reflection then to develop fruitfully? If it is significantly abstract overall, then it threatens both to lose touch with concrete life practices and in doing so to turn either emptily escapist or dogmatically tyrannical. Yet if it lingers entirely in the concrete, then

it threatens to fail to resolve anxieties and to challenge social and practical fractures that are already in place. In the face of this dilemma, reflection seems both impossible and necessary.

Writing roughly between 1795 and 1815 in the wake of emerging secularization and showing a strong consciousness of social life as both fractured **(p.130)** and unavoidable, a number of writers whom we now class as Romantic—pre-eminently Hölderlin and Wordsworth, Goethe in his lyric poetry, and Blake and Coleridge—developed a kind of practice of philosophy by other means. Swerving between abstract reflection and concrete description and between rationalism and empiricism, they developed strong senses of human subjects as bound to a temporality that is not discernibly plotted and yet with which one can (so they suggested) at times come to terms. They accept neither human fatedness to life within unintelligible and impersonal processes alone nor fantasies of either escape or full control of the conditions of life, so that “romanticism” becomes a name for philosophy done, the problem of orientation addressed, otherwise than only in abstract distantiation from the ordinary. Its images of coming to maturity, even if imperfectly and without dogmatism and final closure, stand as models that are distinctly relevant to our thinking about maturity and orientation in life, given a modern social economy that we significantly share with them.[1] Attention to their strongly temporalized thought and writing can help alert us both to how philosophy and poetry may be entangled with one another in relation to certain central problems of modern human life and to possibilities of maturity that we might otherwise fail to notice or articulate.

## 7.2.

It is well known that Hölderlin’s mature poetry is significantly motivated by his sense, developing out of his criticism of Fichte, of the self-occlusion of the Absolute. As in German idealism generally, “the Absolute” names that which is not dependent on anything else and simply is––a self-determining whole that includes all of nature and human life. Contra Fichte, Hölderlin argues, “If I say: ‘I am I, [then] the subject (“I”) and the object (“I) are *not* united in such a way that no separation could be performed without violating the essence of what is to be separated; on the contrary, the I is only possible by means of this separation of the I from the I.”[2] Ignoring the mistaken treatment of the *is* of identity as the *is* of predication, the argument is straightforward and compelling. Being a subject—that which we primarily refer to by means of “I”—implies apperceptive unity; that is, it implies at least the possibility of coming to be explicitly aware of the contents of one’s consciousness *as* the contents of one’s consciousness. Any thing that lacked this capacity could not properly be called a subject. But this capacity in turns implies the ability, as it were, to separate oneself from oneself, in particular to focus on the contents of one’s consciousness as *not* essential to what one is. I am thinking of a dog, say, but I could be thinking instead (and sometimes do think instead) of a cup of coffee. Hence neither of these contents is itself essential to my identity as a subject. But

for the Absolute, in contrast, everything is essential. That is, it is not subject-like. And hence, further, we, as **(p.131)** finite subjects are separated, cast out, from this original, all-embracing unity of Being as such. Insofar as we do possess a consciousness that is both apperceptively unified and discursive (such that we are able to form judgments), we are “outside” a more original, inclusive unity, able to attend to this or that, but never simply bound within the flow of the whole. Our status as subjects is marked, as Hölderlin puts it, by an “arche-separation,” an *Ur-theilung*.[3] Both reflection and we as subjects capable of reflection are somehow within the Absolute, but also separated from *its* continuous self-development, not essential to it.

It is not immediately clear how much of this argument is sound or what its implications are. It might well be conceded that the Absolute—supposing to begin with that we find much use for a concept of the whole of Being—is not itself subject-like or reflective or apperceptively unified in the way that we are as finite subjects. But why should that thought imply the further thought that we, as finite subjects, are somehow exterior to it, separated or cast out from it?

Here Hölderlin is best taken as registering an *experienced* sense of exteriority, of absence of orientation, and of the capacity for reflection as a set of undischarged burdens that have roots that are all at once religious, biographical, sociohistorical, and anthropologico-developmental. In religious terms, an understanding of the Absolute as non-subject-like and self-enclosed already registers a sense of the collapse or unavailability of any narrative of God’s providence. In his 1785 *Briefe über die Lehre Spinozas* that initiated the Pantheism Controversy, Jacobi had already associated Spinozism with materialism and atheism, and this association was well known to Hölderlin and his Tübingen circle during his student years. A Spinozist Absolute is, therefore, marked as a nonprovidential, non-Christian Absolute for Hölderlin.

Biographically, Hölderlin experienced a continuing series of failures to settle into a permanent position. From 1793, when he left Tübingen, to 1802, he held a series of tutorships in private families at Waltershausen, Frankfurt, Hauptwil (Switzerland), and Bordeaux (France), retaining only one of them for more than four months. The exception—January 1796 to September 1798 in the household of the Gontards in Frankfurt—was marked by an intense and disastrous love affair with Suzette Gontard, the much younger wife of his banker employer. Following his dismissal from this post, Hölderlin managed a number of clandestine meetings with Suzette up until her death in June 1802. After 1802, following his return from Bordeaux in a precarious mental condition, Hölderlin lived primarily in Homburg with an official salary as court librarian, but no real duties, until his removal to a Tübingen asylum in 1806 and final years in the care of Ernst Zimmer from 1807 to 1843. This unstable itinerary shows a marked lack of any unifying narrative or sense of continuing orientation. Improvised arrangements are made hurriedly, and they do not last long. Sociohistorically,

Hölderlin’s career is marked by his refusal to take up the post **(p.132)** of a village pastor for which he had been trained at Tübingen. Not much else was open to him other than a position as a private tutor. Hölderlin was neither noble nor rich enough to enter court life, nor was either the university or the market economy yet fully open to an ambitious young man with primarily theological training. Hence Hölderlin’s drift, though exacerbated by his mental instability, is not untypical of the rootlessness of a young male member of an emerging humanistically educated class who lacked definite social prospects. Finally, anthropologico-developmentally, it is, after all, a mystery how anyone comes to be a subject with discursively structured consciousness. This development into a life of explicit claim-making, norm-mongering, and reflectiveness does not happen with other animals. How, then, do we move from the dependent infants we initially are into being the active makers of judgments we come to be? Surely training, initiation into language, and the attentions of others play important roles in this development, but how, and to what purpose? A sense of rootlessness or undirectedness might well arise for anyone in light of this course of development, and on Hölderlin’s part this sense can only have been exacerbated by his religious, biographical, and modern sociohistorical experiences.

Independent of argument, then, about exclusion from a Spinozist Absolute, Hölderlin’s sense of exteriority to Being as such is, to put it mildly, overdetermined. Whether or not there is a proof of the exteriority of reflective consciousness to being, Hölderlin nonetheless powerfully thematizes an experience of exteriority and difficulty of orientation. Or, as he puts it, there is “a universal contradiction within man... between the striving for the absolute and the striving for restriction.”[4] We seek, that is, to achieve mastery or appropriate orientation by means of philosophical knowledge of the whole of Being and our place in it, and we also find ourselves driven to throw off the burden of reflective consciousness and to accept limitation and naturalness. As Terry Pinkard usefully explicates the point, the founding thought of both German idealism and German romanticism, initiated by Hölderlin, is that “it is the way in which we hold such oppositions together that characterizes our agency.... We always begin with a ‘certainty’ about where we are––with a practical, pre-reflective implicit grasp of what counts as vouching for our judgments, our practices, our valuations... and we then come to ask whether that ‘certainty’ has any ‘truth’ in light of the kinds of skepticism that open up as that form of ‘certainty’ subjects itself to its own internal tests.”[5] Hegel’s wager is that this prereflective “certainty” is already implicitly conceptual and that that conceptual commitment can be made explicit, tested, and revised until we arrive at stable enough orientation. Hölderlin’s particular honesty and courage—his openness to continuing skepticism—is instead to hold that both striving for a reflective understanding of appropriate orientation *and* openness to sudden, abrupt, uncontrolled limitation (whether via reversal or via the absorptive sweep of love,

beauty, and **(p.133)** passion) persist always in tension with one another, with no standing resolution and only moments of relative balance.[6]

The result in Hölderlin’s writing, both theoretical and poetic, that enacts this tension is a kind of back-and-forth movement between distantiated, abstract theorizing and immersive, absorptive dwelling in perception and feeling as given. In the mode of abstract theorizing, he seeks the “true profundity” of “complete knowledge of the parts that we must found and combine into one, and deep knowledge of that which founds and comprehends, piercing to the farthest end of knowledge.”[7] Without fundamental knowledge of one’s place in the whole, there is neither dignity nor actively maintained orientation. In more optimistic Fichtean moments, Hölderlin suggests that “he who truly acts according to the whole is by himself thereby more consecrated to peace and more disposed to esteem the individual.”[8] This implies that action according to the whole is possible and hence that the wages of reflection on the whole that issues in appropriate action need not be only distantiation and alienation. Likewise, in a 1797 letter to Schiller, Hölderlin argues that abstract reflection, shying from life into thought, while difficult, is also both natural and fruitful.

> I now regard the metaphysical mood as a kind of virginity of spirit, and I believe that shyness in the face of the material, however unnatural it is in itself, is nonetheless very natural at a certain period of life, and that it is for a time beneficial, just as all flights out of determinate relations are, since they check the power in oneself and make the spendthrift youthful life thrifty, for just so long, until its now ripe exuberance drives it to divide and distribute itself [*sich zu theilen*] in relation to manifold objects... I believe also... that the Idea is prior to the Concept, just as the tendency is prior to the (determinate, regular) act. I regard Reason [*die Vernunft*] as the beginning of the understanding [*der Verstand*], and if the good will hesitates and has to exert itself in order to form a useful intention, so do I find this just as characteristic for human nature in general as it is characteristic for Hamlet, for whom it is so difficult to do something for the sake of the single end of avenging his father.[9]

Here, however, the optimism, while present, is substantially more moderated. Instead of giving up philosophy as fruitless, as Schiller had urged him to do, Hölderlin defends metaphysics and abstract reflection as appropriate for a certain period of time at a certain stage of life. It as it were helps us to gather and collect our powers, thence to use them appropriately, rather than wasting them in heapish series of unreflective, ill-considered actions. But as the concluding reference to Hamlet suggests, it may nonetheless be far from straightforward to translate the fruits of reason into specific action.

**(p.134)** In recoil, then, from a life of abstract reflection that produces as much continuing anxiety as direction, Hölderlin also celebrates the fact that the “airy spirits [*Luftgeister*] with metaphysical wings”[10] have left him, thus enabling greater peace in freedom from reflection. Persistent thinking about orientation, without fixed and stable results, yields only restlessness; without receptivity, there is no composure. Something must come from without, in order to inform and give content to thinking. Thought alone is unable to generate determinate objects. “When I think an object as possible, then I only repeat the previously existent consciousness by means of which it is actual. There is for us no thinkable possibility that was not at one time actuality.”[11] As Violetta Waibel usefully comments, “Hölderlin seems not simply to negate principles and a priori moments of thinking, but rather to regard them as forms of abstraction that are not thinkable independently and without being bound to concrete states of affairs.”[12] Broadly speaking, as Waibel also notes, a suspicion of abstract thinking on Hölderlin’s part is a continuing point of contact between his poetological writings and the skepticism of Jacobi. Both Jacobi and Hölderlin, as Waibel puts it, give primacy to “existential orientation in the world [*Befindlichkeit in der Welt*]” and so “assign to anthropology…a precedence over a philosophical mode of explanation that threatens to become an intellectual end in itself.”[13] This suspicion of abstract thinking is further reinforced by Hölderlin’s reading of Plato, especially of the *Symposium*, where love (eros) is presented as a force of attraction to concrete things that is co-primordial with the emergence of consciousness itself. Or in Hölderlin’s own formulation:

> As our original infinite essence became suffering for the first time and as our free, full power felt its first limits, as poverty mated with exuberance, then there was love. Ask yourself: when was that? Plato says: on the day that Aphrodite was born. Thus just then, when the beautiful world began for us, when we came to consciousness, then we became finite.[14]

This condensed parable of the emergence of finite consciousness shows it as always already marked by concrete attraction to finite, beautiful, given objects of attention. Hölderlin’s sense that human consciousness is always so marked leads him, as Thomas Pfau puts it, to develop a “neo-Platonist project of overcoming the sensible/intelligible dualism without relegating the concrete, individual intuition to a mere ancillary *function*.”[15] Moreover, as Pfau goes on, “Hölderlin does not simply stabilize this convergence of intuition and the intelligible in an ontological sense either; for its occurrence, linked to the creative imagination, is ‘accidental,’ that is, cannot be freely grounded as a necessity.”[16] That is to say, while developmentally discursive consciousness begins as always already bound up with experiences of intense felt attractions to natural, more or **(p.135)** less maternal, presences, the recurrence of such intensities of attraction at later stages is hostage to fortune. Within the orbit of this Neoplatonic anthropology that sees thought as bound up with eros, Hölderlin in contrast to idealism shifts, as Pfau puts it, “from a notion of

intuition as *Anschauung* to intuition as analeptic *Ahndung*.”[17] (“*Ahndung*” is Hölderlin’s archaic Swabian spelling of *Ahnung*—presentiment, foreshadowing, or intuitiveness. “Analeptic” indicates that such a presentiment is animating or restorative.) That is to say, orientation in life is achieved, if it is achieved at all, only through an unpredictable, restorative moment of receptivity that furnishes content to a desire that aims to reachieve the intensities of attraction characteristic of early childhood. That such experiences of animated receptivity are essentially occasioned and accidental thus calls into question the very possibility of getting a grip on one’s life according to abstract principles generated in reflection. In Pfau’s formulation, “it poses a serious challenge to the possibility of an integral subjectivity, that is, to the continuity of a ‘self’ as such.”[18]

And yet Hölderlin does not quite abandon reason and reflection altogether. He continues to see the pursuit of autonomy and self-command, grounded in rational reflection and expressed in adherence to principles, as also part of man’s higher than merely animal nature. Unlike other animals, we are, as both burdened and gifted with reflection, anticipation, and memory, open to “infinite satisfaction, ...provided that [man’s] activity is of the right kind, is not too far-reaching for him, for his strength and skill, that he is not too restless, too undetermined nor, on the other hand, too anxious, too restricted, too controlled.”[19] As the unresolved two directions of mutual qualification in this passage show—we must be determined, resolute, in charge of what we do, but not too much; and we must be receptive, open, and ready to accept what happens but not too much[20] ––Hölderlin develops a philosophical anthropology that combines elements from Kant, empiricism, and what would become Hegelianism, but that also differs strikingly from each of them. As in Kant, the exercise of reason and reflection to generate a moral law matters as a fundamental aspect of our dignity, but in contrast with Kant this exercise cannot take place on its own, apart from intense experiences of attraction. As in empiricism, receptive sense-experience is an essential source of content for orientation in life, but in contrast with empiricism sense-experience is not simply dispositive, and it is available not continuously, but only intermittently, in moments of intense attraction to a concrete object, person, or scene. As in Hegel, there is prereflective orientation to the world that can be to some extent articulated, but in contrast with Hegel the relevant articulation that yields orientation is itself temporary, strongly temporalized, and bound up more with erotic attractions, embodiment, and openness to natural beauty than with participation in public life.

**(p.136)** Given, then, Hölderlin’s continuing intense and intensely ambivalent, competing attractions to both active, reflective, abstract theorizing and immersive, absorptive dwelling in perceptions and relationships, it is no surprise that he is unable to follow Schiller’s (all too autobiographical) advice to him that he should “flee philosophical material wherever possible; it is the most thankless

of all, and the best powers are often consumed in fruitless wrestling with it. Remain closer to the world of the senses so that you will be less in danger either of losing sobriety [*Nüchternhheit*] in rapture [*Begeisterung*] or of straying into a contrived [*gekünstelt*] expression.”[21] For Schiller, philosophy and abstract reflection could and should be left behind, as Schiller indeed abandoned them and returned to drama after the period of his intense absorption in Kantianism from 1793 to 1795. In contrast, instead of turning away from philosophy and to poetry as a separate and distinct practice, Hölderlin takes up the task of incorporating alternations between moments of abstract reflection and moments of intense absorption into a self-developing poetic whole. As he comments in a 1799 letter to his brother,

> Poetry unites men not, I say, in the manner of play; it unites them, namely, when it is genuine and functions [*wirkt*] genuinely––with all the manifold suffering, happiness, striving, hoping and fearing, with all the opinions and errors, all the virtues and ideas, with everything great and small, that is among them—as a living, thousandfold divided [*gegliedert*] heartfelt [*innig*] whole.[22]

The consequence in the poetry of the bearing of this task is that poetry remains internally related to philosophy, as it is oriented around what Hölderlin calls transitions (*Wechsel*) in mood, where the transitions themselves are marked by the same sort of difficulty and abruptness that mark their occurrence in daily life. Or as Hölderlin puts it to his brother, “I cannot easily find my way out of reasoning [*Raisonnement*] and into poetry, and vice versa….Perhaps only a few people will have as much difficulty with the transition [*Übergang*] from one mood to another as I do.”[23]

The result is a difficult poetry more continuously of open, even abrupt, transition than of completed doctrinal closure. As Waibel usefully puts it, Hölderlin’s concept—decisive for his poetry—of reciprocal determination (*Wechselbestimming*) of moods must be understood in the framework of a theory of drives. One concept at the same time determines its opposite, so that both stand in a relation of reciprocal determination. Something must stand opposed to the I that is infinite in itself—either an object or alternatively a world of objectivity—in order for it to feel and cognize. In the same way, a striving toward the infinite, that is, a striving to realize ideas, is also unthinkable, **(p.137)** without a simultaneous striving toward limitation, that is, toward an actual recognition of the conditioned character of existence.[24]

Neither drive—neither the drive toward selfhood and fully autonomous activity in self-sustaining abstract thinking, nor the drive toward receptivity to and absorption in the finite—can properly be denied, abandoned, or avoided. Or as Hölderlin puts it in a prose fragment of the metrical version of *Hyperion*, “we cannot deny the drive to free ourselves, to ennoble ourselves, to progress into

the infinite. That would be animalistic. But we can also not deny the drive to be determined, to be receptive; that would not be human.”[25] Since both drives remain present and undeniable, with neither being sacrificed to the other and with no possibility of their stable integration, the result, as Waibel puts it, of “the thought-figure of reciprocal determination” is “a metaphysics of the finite” that continuously accepts and embraces “the possibility of reversal.”[26]

Within the poetry that enacts this sense of the subject always open to the possibility of reversal, it is necessary, always, “to bear the momentarily incomplete.”[27] “Real effectiveness” requires neither too much mingling of self-determining, ennobling, reflective activity with sensuousness, receptivity, and the ordinary nor too much isolation from them.[28] Instead of simply reaching a doctrinal conclusion, and instead of maintaining itself either in the sphere of pure reflective activity or in the sphere of the registering of the sensuously given, the successful poem must instead *work through* reflective-rational activity in relation to experience of a sensuously given object. The proper thematic subject matter of poetry in general is thus, one might say, not a given object, but rather an object as-it-is-experienced-by-a-subject-prompted-to-feeling-and-reflection in relation to it. In close proximity to the Wordsworthian thought that it is “the feeling [and associated reflection] therein developed [that] gives importance to the [given] action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling,”[29] self-recognition is possible only by attending to and working through relations between subject activity and determinate objects. As Waibel summarizes the point, for Hölderlin

> Self-knowledge can only grasp the determinations of human existence when it reaches out beyond a merely formal self-relation. This self-knowledge must withdraw itself from the aporias of either taking itself to be completely graspable through its own activity—which would produce only a completely reflective but thereby dead unity—or preserving an original liveliness [of experience], but thereby being unable to grasp completely either the determination of humanity or the determination of poetic composition [*Dichtung*]. Self-knowledge arises in a living manner, according to Hölderlin, when the subject freely chooses an object through which it recognizes itself.[30]

**(p.138)** Self-knowledge is achieved, therefore, through an essentially temporal course of development of modulated thoughts and feelings in relation to a given object of experience. A narration of the course of its achievement—the only way to render its content—will consist essentially of four successive stages or registers of experience that are reflected in the poem:

> (1) An initiating, felt, unarticulated total impression of an object, scene, or incident

(2) The weakening of this initial receptive impression through reflection and the division of the objects presented in the total impression into opposed yet interrelated parts
(3) The maintaining of the identity of the subject as a locus of active attentiveness in relation to the development of the poetic material in moving from 1 to 2
(4) The achievement in writing of complete internal relatedness of 1, 2, and 3 in a constructed sequence of modulations from beginning (initial total receptiveness––1) to middle (conditioned but active subject activity––2 and 3) to end (modulated expressiveness of the good-enough stability of the subject thus achieved across varying moments of thought and receptivity—4).[31]

The successful poem that begins in 1, moves through 2 and 3, and completes itself constructively in 4 is thus itself an achievement of a good-enough self-unity despite the omnipresent fact of reversals of subject activity by sensuous givenness and of sensuous givenness by subject activity. Hence the underlying thought that is embodied in successful Hölderlinian lyric poetry is that “Es war doch so schön”[32] ––it was all so beautiful anyway. In its registering, expressing, and enacting of the play of opposed drives, the successful lyric poem is an acknowledgment of the fundamental circumstances of human life as a life of conditioned subject activity open to reversals. It is, hence, not the abandonment of philosophy and reflective activity in favor of poetry, but instead their situation as conditioned within the context of ongoing human life.

## 7.3.

Thematically and formally, Hölderlin’s poetic practice that situates philosophical reflection within the course of life develops out of a number of earlier experimentations in theme and form. His earliest poems, such as his early Tübingen hymns, alternate between sentimental expressiveness of a subjective mood in the style of Klopstock (as in “The Oaks” and “To the Aether”) and a more objectively celebratory mode derived from Schiller (as in “Hymn to the Goddess of **(p.139)** Harmony” and “Hymn to Immortality”). Significantly, however, already these early hymns display a certain awkwardness in stance, as though the standpoint for what is either to be worshipped or objectively celebrated were not entirely secure.[33] During his Frankfurt period from January 1796 to September 1798, Hölderlin produced a number of Diotima poems, inspired by Suzette Gontard, as well as nature poems and shorter, epigrammatic odes.[34] A sharper sense of the difficulties of maintaining an enthusiastic or a celebratory stance and voice, a sense that is evident also in the contemporary correspondence and theoretical writings, then seems to develop during the composition of *Hyperion* in the period from 1794 to 1797, perhaps influenced by the difficulties of his clandestine relations with Suzette/Diotima. As Hölderlin famously writes in the preface to the penultimate version of the novel,

> We all run through an eccentric path [*eine exzentrische Bahn*], and there is no other way possible from childhood to completion [*Vollendung*].
>
> Blissful unity, Being in the unique sense of the word, is lost for us and we had to lose it if we are to strive after it and achieve it.
>
> …We have fallen out with nature, and what was once (as we believe) One is now in conflict with itself, and mastery and servitude alternate on both sides. It often seems to us as if the world were everything and we nothing, but often too as if we were everything and the world nothing.
>
> …But neither our knowledge nor our action can attain in any period of our existence to that point at which all conflict ceases, where All is one; the determinate line can be united with the indeterminate only through an infinite approximation [*in unendlicher Annäherung*].[35]

Here the subject position is markedly and unresolvedly unstable. Conflict is endemic between the human subject standing out from blissful immersion in the whole and the whole within which that subject’s activity should be but cannot be harmoniously resolved. As a result, nothing can be simply and unreservedly praised or celebrated; no doctrine is available to stabilize and justify the stance of the subject who would praise, but who remains caught within alternations between excess, merely subjective enthusiasm (“as if we were everything and the world nothing”) and quiescent, merely passive absorption (“as if the world were everything and we nothing”).

The result of this sense of the subject position as always already bound up in conflict is a poetry of loss and finitude that tracks and expresses this plight of the subject without resolving it. It narrates arcs of motion through moments of absorption in the given that are always liable to be ruptured by reflection and moments of reflection, power, and insight that are always liable to be ruptured by a returning, attractive but recalcitrant given. Rather than announcing **(p. 140)** a doctrine achieved, whether conciliatory or despairing, it moves in fits and starts, halted by this moment of perception, then regaining an energy of compositional onwardness in registering it, then faltering again as the energy cannot be sustained in any single continuing direction. That is, the major poetry enacts an effort together with its foundering. It tracks and locates the place of the human subject as a being capable of self-initiated attention, reflection, and thought within a whole that it should know, but cannot, and within which it should be at peace, but cannot be. It is neither within philosophy nor outside it, but is rather marked internally by both philosophy and its foundering, just as we live neither continuously within reflectiveness nor altogether outside it, neither altogether at home nor altogether as nomads.

7.4.

Among Hölderlin’s major poems, the substantial but still incomplete “Rousseau” (1800) is especially clear thematically in illustrating Hölderlin’s mature sense of the problem for the human subject of living simultaneously within the necessity of reflection and the impossibility of completing it. It is in part a reworking into an alcaic ode of the slightly earlier asclepic ode “To the Germans.” (Its opening line is line 1 of strophe 11 of “To the Germans.”) Its general project is simultaneously to praise Rousseau’s exemplary achieved subjectivity while also describing its limitations, thus avoiding any triumphalist doctrinalism. Rousseau, as Hölderlin sees him, bears up, one might say, under the burden of a subjectivity given over both to visionary reflection on new possibilities of more meaningful human life and to their standing incompleteness. Hölderlin had read Rousseau’s *The Social Contract* in 1791. As one of the so-called uncouth Jacobins, Hölderlin planted a Liberty Tree in a meadow near the Tübingen seminary on Bastille Day, 1793, an act that provoked Duke Karl Eugen to place the group under surveillance. While in Jena in September 1795, Hölderlin planned to draft a new educational program modeled on Rousseau’s *Emile* and *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse*.[36] Noting that Rousseau’s name is the first name of a modern writer that appears on a list of writers on whom Hölderlin planned to write for his projected journal *Iduna*, Stanley Corngold remarks that Rousseau “represents Hölderlin’s first leap of thought to modern writing; he constitutes Hölderlin’s frame for his grasp of literary modernity.”[37] Commenting on the appearances of Rousseau in “The Rhine” (1801), Paul de Man notes that Rousseau is, for Hölderlin, paradigmatically the one who exercises the distinctive powers of a human subject in using language: “Rousseau, as in the ode that bears his name, appears above all as the man of language: he listens (l. 143) he speaks (l. 144), he gives language (l. 146), and song (l. 165).”[38] Richard Unger describes Rousseau **(p. 141)** as functioning as a precursor figure and uncanny double for Hölderlin himself. “Rousseau’s “strangeness” for Hölderlin is…the uncanniness a poet must experience in another man who ultimately projects his own destiny. Paradoxically, Hölderlin views Rousseau, a writer of prose, as the man who most clearly anticipates the poetic fulfillment he himself desires.”[39]

Both the destiny of the modern human subject as the bearer of language and reflectiveness and the sort of qualified poetic fulfillment that is possible for such a subject are then projected onto Rousseau in the poem “Rousseau,” and the itinerary of the bearing of that destiny and of the achievement of that qualified fulfillment is tracked narratively. The poem consists of ten strophes, with the first four in strict alcaic metric patterns (lines of 11, 11, 9, and 10 beats with a regular pattern of stresses) and the last six in uncompleted approximations to the alcaic. The first line of the seventh strophe includes an unfilled in past participle prefix (“ge”), marking it as uncompleted. The last line of the tenth and final strophe is a nonstandard, more abrupt seven-beat line that lends an air of

conclusion to the fragment, despite its ending as a fragment with a comma rather than a full stop. First in German and then in Nick Hoff’s English translation, it reads as follows:

Rousseau

Wie eng begränzt ist unsere Tageszeit.
Du warst und sahst und stauntest, schon Abend ists.
Nun schlafe, wo unendlich ferne
Ziehen vorüber die Völkerjahre.

Und mancher sieht über die eigene Zeit
Ihm zeigt ein Gott ins Freie, doch sehnend stehst
Am Ufer du, ein Aergerniß den
Deinen, ein Schatten, und liebst sie nimmer.

Und jene, die du nennst, die Verheißenen,
Wo sind die Neuen, daß du an Freundeshand
Erwarmst, wo nahn sie, daß du einmal
Einsame Rede, vernehmlich seiest?

Klanglos ist, armer Mann, in der Halle dir,
Und gleich den Unbegrabenen, irrest du
Unstät und suchest Ruh und niemand
Weiß den beschiedenen Weg zu weisen.

Sei denn zufrieden! der Baum entwächst
Dem heimathlichen Boden, aber es sinken ihm
Die liebenden, die jugendlichen
Arme, und trauernd neigt er sein Haupt.

**(p.142)** Des Lebens Überfluß, das Unendliche,
Das um ihn und dämmert, er faßt es nie.
Doch lebts in ihm und gegenwärtig,
Wärmend und wirkend, die Frucht entquillt ihm.

Du hast gelebt! ge auch dir, auch dir
Erfreut die ferne Sonne dein Haupt,
Und Stralen aus der schönen Zeit, es
Habe die Boten dein Herz gefunden.

Vernommen hast du sie verstanden die Sprache der Fremdlinge,
Gedeutet ihre Seele! Dem Sehnenden war
Genug der Wink, und Winke sind
Von Alters her die Sprache der Götter.

Und wunderbar, als hätte von Anbeginn
Des Menschen Geist, das Werden und Wirken all,
Des Lebens alte Weise schon erfahren

Kennt er im ersten Zeichen Vollendetes schon,

Und fliegt, der kühne Geist, wie Adler den
Gewittern, weissagend seinen
Kommenden Göttern, voraus.

How limited the time of our day.
You were and saw and marveled, it’s evening already.
So sleep now, where infinitely far
The years of the nations drift overhead.

And some see past their own time,
A god has shown them the open, but longing
You stand on the shore, a scandal to your kin,
A shade, and you no longer love them,

And those you name, the new and inspired ones,
Where are they to warm you with their
Friendly hands, and where do they approach so that you,
Lonely speech, might one day be heard?

The halls, poor man, give no echo,
And like the unburied dead you wander
Unsettled and look for rest, and no one can
Show you the determined path.

So content yourself with this! the tree outgrows
Its native soil, but its loving
Youthful boughs droop down,
And it bows its crown in mourning.

**(p.143)** The overflow of life, the infinite,
That around him, dawning, he never grasps it.
Yet it lives in him, and, all the while,
Warming and effective, the fruit springs forth from him.

You have lived! The distant sun ed you too
And gladdens too your head,
And rays from a better time,
The messengers have found your heart.

You perceived, you understood the language of strangers,
Interpreted their soul! The hint sufficed
The longing one, and hints have long
Been the language of the gods.

And wondrous, as if from the outset the human spirit
Had experienced all that would be born and made manifest,
The ancient way of life

In the first signs he sees their completion
And, emboldened with this insight, flying like an eagle
Ahead of the storm, he prophesies

The coming of his gods.[40]

The plot of the fragment divides into roughly three parts. Strophes 1–4 describe Rousseau’s alienation from and outsiderliness to his contemporaries and his failure to win an audience for his writing. Strophes 2–8.2 describe a kind of consolation available to Rousseau in having lived and produced something anyway. Strophes 8.2–10 offer generalizations about the stance of anyone who might be moved to flights of vision and composition.

Part I begins with a generalization that emphasizes the general fact of human finitude, without specific reference to Rousseau. Rousseau then appears as the second-person, past-tense addressee in line 2, where he is described as having been, having seen, and having been astounded by things. But that time of vision is past. The years pass by, as though their passing were the natural course of things, without occasioning any particular pain. In the second strophe, however, Rousseau is particularly marked as someone who stands out against his time, on the shores of something different, an annoyance or scandal to his kin and a shadow who is unable to love them. The third and fourth strophes then reinforce and deepen this outsiderliness, as those to whom he has called do not appear, so that Rousseau himself, metonymized as “lonely speech” (*Einsame Rede*), stands alone, without being heard, without echo or reception, hence unreceived, like the unburied, and given over to inconstancy, restlessness, and errancy, without any allotted path to follow. Far from treating Rousseau as a successful and confident prophet, the master thought in these **(p.144)** first four strophes is of Rousseau in his reflective visionariness and hopes for more meaningful life as inherently outside the common and barred from any terms of reception.

The main pivot of the poem then comes in the first line of strophe 5, as the speaker offers Rousseau a kind of consolation or at least a command to be satisfied anyway, inasmuch as the tree that outgrows its ground nonetheless remains connected to it, casting its branches downward. So too might Rousseau, mourning, remain in contact with the people who fail to receive him. And so too, though he is unable successfully to grasp or understand it in order to master it, might there remain a life or power in him that produces something, as the tree produces its fruit unknowingly. One who accepts this consolation will then have lived and written anyway and so stood within a movement of life that nonetheless cannot be understood and mastered. Thus in writing Rousseau will have written for those who are yet to come, even if this writing remains less the purveying of a doctrine than a felt interpretation of the soul or life energy that they are to actualize expressively in a new life of autonomy blended with love. Rousseau himself then remains in the position of the one who is longing (“dem Sehnenden”), not the one who confidently knows and guides.

What Rousseau has then achieved—a felt, expressive, but indeterminate response in words to a difficult, fragmented condition coupled with a visionary but indeterminate hope for a better one––is then generalized as characteristic of anyone who is longing for life otherwise. Such a one may be responsive to hints (“Winke”), as if, subjunctively (“hätte”) the ground plot and purpose of human life were determinately available to reflection and poetic vision, even though they are not or not fully. What remains as possible is then to fly over the land and life of the people, discerning signs and anticipating their fulfillment, but still only prophesying what remains yet to come.

And this very movement that is ascribed to Rousseau—a movement from problematic, visionary outsider, to locus of the expression of life and power that are not discursively grasped, to a renewed, qualified ability to live and move anyway—this movement is itself completed in the poem, as Hölderlin / the speaker moves from awed captivation with Rousseau’s visionary strangeness and untimeliness to a larger sense that strangeness and uncanniness as such may be both aspects of and expressible within a wider movement of life itself. Reflection and speech are, therefore, possible for a finite, human subject within life, even when the terms of that life are not open to full, discursive, philosophical understanding. Sustaining and developing this thought through the course of the poem composed in relation to Rousseau as an object of both absorption and reflection amounts, then, to a kind of temporalized self-knowledge, or a kind of Romantic philosophy in the absence of systematic philosophy, that takes both human powers of reflection and human finitude seriously.

Notes:

(1) . For an extended argument in support of this characterization of romanticism, see Richard Eldridge, *The Persistence of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), esp. 1–28, 102–23, and 229–45.

(2) . Friedrich Hölderlin, “Judgment and Being,” in Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*, trans. and ed. Thomas Pfau (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 37–38; emphasis added.

(3) . Ibid., 37, where “arche-separation” translates “Urtheilung”; HSW 4/1, 216.

(4) . Hölderlin, “Letter no. 121, To his Brother,” June 2, 1796, in HSW 4/1, 133.

(5) . Terry Pinkard, “Subjects, Objects, and Normativity: What Is It Like to *Be* an Agent?” *Internationales Jahrbuch des Deutschen Idealismus / International Yearbook of German Idealism* 1 (2003): 201–219; here: 202, 206.

(6) . This is a master theme of Dieter Henrich’s epochal work on Hölderlin, as in Henrich’s observation that for Hölderlin “Conscious life is at once *shaped and unbalanced* by the basic conflicting tendencies orienting it. And the formative process of life aims at finding a balance and harmony amidst this strife, in which no one tendency is entirely suppressed or denied in its own right.” Dieter Henrich, “Hölderlin in Jena,” in *The Course of Remembrance and Other Essays on Hölderlin*, trans. Taylor Carman, ed. Eckart Förster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 112; emphasis added. For a reading of Hölderlin in relation to the persisting “truth of skepticism” (as characterized by Stanley Cavell) and focusing on Hölderlin’s deliberately ambiguous, formal poetic response to this situation, see Eldridge, “Cavell and Hölderlin on Human Immigrancy,” in *The Persistence of Romanticism*, 229–45. For a masterful reading of how this sense of tension inhabits Hölderlin’s theoretical texts, especially his essay “On the Operations of the Poetic Spirit,” followed by a reading of Hölderlin’s “The Ages of Life” (“Lebensalter”), see Hannah Vandegrift Eldridge, “The Influence of Anxiety: Poetology as Symptom,” *German Quarterly* 86, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 443–62.

(7) . Hölderlin, “Letter no. 121, To his Brother,” in *Essays and Letters on Theory*, 133.

(8) . Hölderlin, “Letter no. 219, To his Brother,” HSW 4/1, 419; my translation.

(9) . Hölderlin, “Letter no. 144, To Schiller,” HSW 4/1, 249; my translation.

(10) . Hölderlin, “Letter no. 128, To Hegel,” HSW 4/1, 222; my translation.

(11) . Hölderlin, “Urtheil und Sein,” in HSW 4/1, 216; my translation.

(12) . Violetta Waibel, *Hölderlin und Fichte, 1794–1800* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2000), 102; my translation.

(13) . Ibid., 104.

(14) . Hölderlin, *Hyperion: Die metrische Fassung*, HSW 3, 192; my translation.

(15) . Thomas Pfau, “Critical Introduction,” in Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*, 9.

(16) . Ibid., 16.

(17) . Ibid., 28.

(18) . Ibid., 18.

(19) . Hölderlin, “On Religion,” in *Essays and Letters on Theory*, 90.

(20) . See Hannah Vandegrift Eldridge’s remarks about a similar ambivalence and structure of unresolved qualification in Hölderlin’s Essay “On the Operations of the Poetic Spirit,” in “The Influence of Anxiety.”

(21) . Friedrich Schiller, “Letter no. 28, To Hölderlin,” in HSW 7/1, 46; my translation.

(22) . Hölderlin, “Letter no. 172, To his Brother,” in HSW 4/1, 306; my translation.

(23) . Ibid. 305; my translation.

(24) . Waibel, *Hölderlin und Fichte*, 132; my translation.

(25) . Hölderlin, *Hyperion: Die metrische Fassung*, in HSW 3, 194; my translation.

(26) . Waibel, *Hölderlin und Fichte*, 196; my translation.

(27) . Hölderlin, “Reflection,” in *Essays and Letters on Theory*, 46.

(28) . Ibid., 48.

(29) . Wordsworth, “*Preface* to Lyrical Ballads,” in Wordsworth, *Selected Poems and Prefaces*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 448.

(30) . Waibel, *Hölderlin und Fichte*, 294; my translation.

(31) . Compare Ibid., 349.

(32) . This line, appearing in both the Song of the Tower Warden in Goethe’s *Faust* and as the last line of Wedekind’s *Pandora’s Box*, is taken by Herbert Marcuse as the formula, as it were, of successful art, art that achieves “the reconciliation which…catharsis offers [that] also preserves the irreconcileable.” Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, trans. Herbert Marcuse and Erica Sherover (Boston: Beacon Press, 1977), 59.

(33) . See Richard Unger’s summary of the earliest work in *Hölderlin’s Major Poetry: The Dialectics of Unity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), 11–20.

(34) . Ibid., 29.

(35) . Hölderlin, *Hyperion: Die vorletzte Fassung*, in HSW 3, 326; trans. Richard Unger in Ibid., 22–23, 25, supplemented by my translation.

(36) . The biographical information in this paragraph about Hölderlin’s relations to Rousseau comes from David Constantine, *Hölderlin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 20, 397; Eric Santner, “Chronology,” in Hölderlin, *Hyperion and*

*Selected Poems* (New York: Continuum, 2002), xi, and Scott J. Thompson, “Friedrich Hölderlin: A Chronology of His Life,” http://www.wbenjamin.org/hoelderlin_chron.html.

(37) . Stanley Corngold, “Implications of an Influence: On Hölderlin’s Reception of Rousseau,” in *Romantic Poetry*, vol. 7, ed. Angela Esterhammer (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2002), 474.

(38) . Paul de Man, “The Image of Rousseau in the Poetry of Hölderlin,” in de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 40.

(39) . Unger, *Holderlin’s Major Poetry*, 138.

(40) . HSW 2/1, 12–13; Hölderlin, *Odes and Elegies*, trans. Nick Hoff (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 89, 91.